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## THE COYOTE AS A GAME ANIMAL\*

by

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Last summer while fishing in Quebec, Canada, an old-timer asked me: "Have you ever been moose hunting?" I quickly said "no", figuring that I was about to be invited on a fall hunt. Instead, he growled: "Well, don't ever start; it's a no-good, damn disease." I know what he meant. Coyote hunting falls in the same category. Once you are hooked, there is no known cure and your family, health, and finances suffer accordingly. Coyote hunting is difficult to explain to the non-afflicted. Hunt coyotes? You have got to be kidding.

Coyote hunting is a very special challenge. Even though coyotes may be abundant in an area, that doesn't mean that they're easy to bag with a rifle. However, I happen to enjoy coyote calling to the point where the shooting is almost anti-climax. Others like to hunt coyotes with either sight or trail hounds, to pursue coyotes with all-terrain vehicles, and to spot coyotes while driving through the country.

The more one pursues coyotes, the more one appreciates the coyote and the quality of hunting that he provides. It has been said that a feather fell from the sky one day. The eagle saw it fall; the deer heard it fall; the bear smelled it; but only the coyote saw, heard, and smelled it at the same time. Few animals, if any, are blessed with better senses. I know of no other animal in North America as abundant as the coyote that will test the patience and persistence of the hunter to a greater degree.

Coyote hunting is not for everyone. You either get the "disease" or it fails to take. Occasionally someone develops a new type of call, a new hunting technique; and/or a rise in fur prices brings an upsurge in coyote hunting. The general consensus of opinion is that coyote hunting only takes the top off the coyote population in a given area. Sport hunting of coyotes is self-limiting. It declines as the return per unit of effort decreases. Yet, Donald Balser, Chief of Predator Studies at the Denver Wildlife Research Center, recently made a statement that it is likely that up to five times as many coyotes are killed by sport hunting as are killed by coyote control programs, the point being that there are many more people hunting coyotes than there are conducting control programs--and about five times as much reason to regard a coyote as a game animal than as a non-game pest.

One of the problems with the sport hunting of coyotes is to get the hunting pressure in the right places--those where coyotes are a problem to livestock producers. With this problem in mind, Bob Henderson initiated a Kansas Coyote Hunter Card several years ago. Coyote card carrying hunters were either certified by Bob or the county Extension specialist from Kansas State University, the thought being that such people could be called upon to help livestock producers with a coyote problem. Based on a survey of Kansas coyote hunters back in 1973, they expressed a willingness to travel 50 to 100 miles to

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help a livestock producer. The success of this program depends on an interested county Extension specialist who is in a position not only to certify coyote hunters but to recognize legitimate complaints of livestock depredations by coyotes. As in all human endeavors, the concept is excellent but its success depends on its execution by the individuals involved.

To gain some authoritative information on the subject of elevating the status of the coyotes from predator or varmit to a game species, a questionnaire was developed. It was mailed to the 17 western state wildlife departments--states west of the 100th Meridian. Of the 17 states only one--Colorado--classifies the coyote as a game animal. But coyote control in Colorado has been delegated to the State Department of Agriculture. Such people have little contact with sportsmen; hence, the recreational opportunities that could be provided through sport hunting of coyotes will be largely lost. On the other hand, if the wildlife conservation officers were handling coyote complaints, they would know the coyote hunters in their area and could put them quickly in touch with the rancher. To me the coyote deserves a better chance than a dose of poison, but I will also be quick to admit that there are times when a rancher has no other choice. One can hardly expect a rancher to tolerate coyote depredations on his livestock in order to provide hunting.

There are a number of problems confronting anyone who would like to see the coyote elevated to the status of being a game species. At the head of the list is opposition by livestock interests. This opposition has to be seen to be believed. My first exposure was a sheep rancher in Wyoming. He was a wonderful person--hard working, dedicated to sheep ranching, a pillar in the local community and a reasonable and warm human being; that is, until he saw a coyote. When he did, he spared nothing--vehicle, clothes or personal safety to kill the coyote by any and all means. He had seen too many lambs slaughtered by coyotes.

The next experience occurred on a southern Kansas cattle ranch. Bob Henderson and I were working from daybreak to late at night trying to reduce the coyotes on the ranch; and the place had plenty of coyotes. Our sleep was limited to about four hours per night in a ranch building that was provided for us. In order not to miss us, the rancher awakened me about 3 a.m. on about the third night and launched into a tirade about what coyotes were doing to him. Bob missed the lecture--which I have always regretted. I could hear him peacefully snoring in the rear of the bungalow while I was getting the "treatment." Dawn was starting to break, and the rancher was running out of verbal firepower, a group of coyotes serenaded the end of the rancher's presentation. In utter amazement and disgust, the rancher shouted at poor little old me, bone-tired and weary from the 3 a.m. awakening, "Hear 'em, hear 'em, hear 'em?" I couldn't help but hear 'em and I enjoyed waking up Henderson so that he could share the experience.

In the final analysis the rancher is faced with the day-to-day problem of wresting a living from the land. Control of coyotes is not a sport to him, but a necessity. Sure I know that some coyote problems are a result of poor livestock management practices but maybe he can't afford lambing sheds and the time and money necessary to control coyote depredations. So I have much compassion for the livestock producer and his coyote problems.

In addition to opposition by livestock producers to changing the legal status of a coyote to that of a game animal, there is a lack of public support. Many people profess to be interested in coyotes but really have no understanding of the animal. Livestock damage payments might also have to be assumed by state wildlife departments if the coyote was classed as game. Their limited budgets are already taxed to the limit, and they certainly need no further financial obligations. Then on the West Coast with its large cities, a growing number of citizens whose only contact with wild animals is what they happen to see on the TV screen are insisting on protection for all animals. So any immediate switch of the coyote to game status is not in the foreseeable future.

Some states--Nevada, Utah and South Dakota--do not even require a license to hunt coyotes. It would seem that any type of hunting other than by landowners should require a license.

All states indicate an increase in the sport hunting of coyotes and in calling coyotes in particular except Utah, Nevada, California, and Oklahoma. In these four states the sport of hunting coyotes has remained static in recent years. This increase is largely believed to be a reflection of better prices for fur pelts in the last four or five years. Personally, I am of the opinion that calling coyotes is increasing in popularity. One state--California--permits only mouth calling of coyotes. Electronic calls are forbidden.

Night hunting is permitted in some states and forbidden in others. Some states have severe restrictions on night hunting which undoubtedly stems from the illegal poaching of deer.

Coyote bounties on a statewide basis are paid only in South Dakota. Other states--Colorado, Wyoming, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Oregon--still have county bounties.

It may well be that the coyote will never achieve a universal status as a game species. As far as the coyotes are concerned, they couldn't care less about their legal status. As far as I am concerned, they are the finest game animals I have ever pursued with a rifle. They have provided me with the answer to restricted hunting of other game species, the red tape and the uncertainty of drawings, opening-day hunting competition, high non-resident license fees, short hunting seasons, and restricted land access. But far more important, the coyote has expanded my field mileage in the West and provided me with a basic excuse to enjoy some wonderful outdoor experiences. They have given me the opportunity to enjoy fine rifles--Winchester, of course--in fine rifle country and to know western land with its attendant wildlife, and wonderful people that I probably would not have known without the chance to match wits with a far greater hunter than I ever shall be.

It would be rather easy to become maudlin about the sport of coyote hunting. Perhaps Tom Hudson, a veteran Kansas coyote hunter summarized it best when he said, "Coyote hunting is the most fun that a man can have with his clothes on." Thanks for listening.